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## Black and White in Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels*

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### 1

*The Time of the Angels*, Iris Murdoch's tenth novel, is often called the most philosophical of all her novels. It is certain that a great deal of philosophical discussion is included in it, and Carel Fisher, the central figure of the novel, seems obsessed with the idea of the emancipated soul, something like Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. It would be wrong, however, to take it as a disguised philosophy written in the form of a novel. Attention should be paid not so much to the philosophy as to the artistic excellence of the novel.

*The Time of the Angels* is, above anything else, a work of art, in which various technical devices are exploited to create structural beauty and unity. Such things as legends, dreams, the weather, etc. are effectively used for various purposes, and the symbolic uses of things animate and inanimate add graphic vividness to the theoretic structure of the novel.

Of all these devices, the most effective and permeating is the use of the contrastive colors of black and white. These two colors are used both symbolically and graphically, sometimes contrasted with each other, sometimes each contained in itself. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how black and white are related to the two major figures Carel and Eugene respectively, and how they contribute to the theoretic structure of the novel.

### 2

Iris Murdoch says in an interview by Miyoko Shimada,

This [master-slave relationship] is one of the many subjects about personal relations that interest me ... the way in which some people have power over other people through being made into god figures, as it were.<sup>1</sup>

One of the god figures implied here is Hannah Crean-Smith in her seventh novel *The Unicorn*. Hannah's excessive self-involvement has prevented herself from confronting the reality of other people and therefore has allowed others to change her into "an image of the significance of sufferings", that is, "the image of Christ".<sup>2</sup>

Carel Fisher, rector of a non-existent church in *The Time of the Angels*, is also one of those god figures repeatedly introduced into her novels. He is, however, different from other god figures in that he deifies himself by his own will. Unlike Hannah involuntarily transformed into God through others' imagination, he never lives on his worshippers: he lives not by others' thoughts but by himself. His self-deification is symbolically implied by the fact that he always says, "Come here", "as if his presence were a definite locality".<sup>3</sup> He has detached himself from others so far that he refuses to be touched even by his own brother Marcus.

Carel is not a transparent character and his inner thoughts remain unexplained in the text, but the implication is that his self-deification is somehow related to his past crime. He seduced his brother's wife and made her pregnant in taking revenge on his brother, who had eloped with Carel's sweetheart Anthea Barlow. His brother, informed of his wife's pregnancy, was driven to despair and suicide. Carel seems to be obsessed with this past tragedy, just as Hannah with her attempted murder of her husband. Pattie, a half Negro maid at the rectory, witnesses that he is a suffering soul in spite of his mighty power over people in the rectory.

It seems to her now that, for all his curious solitary gaiety, she had always seen him as a soul in hell. Carel was becoming very frightened and he carried fear about with him as a physical environment.<sup>4</sup>

His past sin that haunts and threatens him is symbolized by an illusionary black mouse, which keeps whisking out of sight in his mind.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to be his past sin that frightens Carel and causes him to try to be a master of human situations through denying the existence of God. It is likely, in other words, that Carel intends to deify himself to escape from his obsessive past sin. If God does not exist any more, there will be no power to

judge him and anything will be permitted. If an amoral world be established, his past crime will be as good as annihilated. Carel's task, then, is to break down the Christian morality based on the idea of God. He rejects God, therefore, and tries to be "a priest of no God"<sup>6</sup>.

As such Carel is a dark figure always associated with something black. He likes the shadows and shuts out daylight with the curtains drawn. He always wears a black cassock, the blackness of which symbolizes not his Christian faith but his past evil doings. Black is the color of sin in his case, and the influences Carel exerts upon people around him are also symbolically expressed by something dark or black. Elizabeth, his presumptive niece but in fact his own daughter, wears black trousers, which implies that she is spell-bound by his 'black magic'. Pattie, who feels deeply knitted with his existence, is a half Negro. The rectory itself overwhelmed by Carel's black power is often veiled and darkened by thick fog.

In contrast to the sinful rector, Eugene Peshkov, a Russian refugee working as a porter at the rectory, is a white figure. Their opposition is clearly presented through Muriel's eyes.

But in some more definite way he [Eugene] had become a necessary presence, an essential counterweight to Carel, the white figure against the black one.<sup>7</sup>

White, as is often the case, is the symbol of innocence, and Eugene's innocence is likened to that of animals. Pattie thinks that he has a "gentle mournful face like an animal", and for Carel's daughter Muriel, Eugene seems to represent the innocent world from which somehow she has been alienated.

He [Eugene] seemed to represent that world of thoughtless affections and free happy laughter and dogs passing by in the street from which she felt herself to be totally separated.<sup>8</sup>

The contrast between Carel and Eugene is made explicit by their different behaviors on the day when the heavy fog that enveloped the rectory suddenly rolls away to reveal the sun brightly shining on the white snow. The change of weather implies that Eugene's white world has gained in strength

over Carel's black world.

Carel was wearing dark glasses.

"Pattie, would you mind pulling the curtains? I don't like the glare from the snow."

Pattie pulled the curtains.

"More carefully, please. There's still some light showing."<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Eugene goes into rapture over the white snow, rushes out into the virgin snow, and plays innocently in the snow like a child.

He felt himself the center of some pure transparent system infinitely spinning, infinitely still. There was no place in this limpid universe where darkness could hide.<sup>10</sup>

Eugene's whiteness is closely related with his past, just as Carel's blackness with his dark past. Eugene, who is of noble birth as is suggested by his name,<sup>11</sup> wandered around various countries as a refugee after the Russian Revolution. Though he underwent various hardships during the wandering days, he never lost any of his happy childhood memories in Russia. They were (and are) something like most precious jewels of which nobody could rob him.

As for his memories, it is to be noticed that they are full of white images. One of them is the sparkly surface of white snow through which his servant carried him on his own sledge. Another is the country house of his family whose name is "Byelaya Doleena" meaning "White Glen or White Glade". Most important of all, however, is that whiteness lies deeply in the core of his existence and surfaces from his subconscious in his dreams. In his dreams he is a mouse and lifts up each fringe of his English governess' petticoats which are "white as milk". He also dreams of a white dog, which turns out to be his English terrier killed by a mastiff. Just as Carel is a black figure and his blackness comes from his sinful past, Eugene is a white figure and his whiteness comes from his innocent past.

The contrast between black and white seen in Carel and Eugene is not only related to their past experiences. It also reflects the difference of their present attitudes toward life. Eugene is a passive character ruled by

unpredictable circumstances, as is typically seen in his life as a refugee. A victim of the contingent world, he suffers a great deal for no reason. Carel, on the other hand, is positive. He demolishes the traditional Christian morality and tries to be a god himself in the godless world by controlling the human situations. To borrow from Nietzsche's terminology, Carel is the personification of 'positive nihilism' while Eugene is that of 'passive nihilism'. Thus, Carel and Eugene make a significant pair and function as the two centers of all the human relationships in the novel.

### 3

Muriel, Carel's daughter, regards herself as the protector of her niece Elizabeth, who is bed-ridden because of a chronic back disability. She thinks Elizabeth should not be a sleeping beauty but a real, independent woman, and plans to take her out of the closed system of the rectory imposed by Carel. Her encounter with Eugene's son Leo gives her a good chance to fulfill her wish. She decides to introduce Leo to her niece, hoping that his youthful cheerfulness will have a good effect on her niece.

It seems to her, however, that she cannot carry out her plan by herself. Though she is strong-willed, she needs a kind of spiritual support to rebel against her father. She is sometimes "threatened by something dark coming out of the ground which rears itself up and up" in her dream.<sup>12</sup> It shows that she is affected with his father's blackness deep inside. She senses that she is not white enough to oppose his father, and unconsciously looks for a white figure to support her in carrying out her plan.

There are times when she weakly yearned for she know not what reunion with simple innocent things, with thoughtless affection and free happy laughter and dogs passing by in the street.<sup>13</sup>

What she yearns for here is Eugene's white magic. Unfortunately for her, Eugene does not like her, but her love of the white figure gives her courage all the same. Invigorated by her love of Eugene, she succeeds in fighting against the pressure of Carel's gaze, when she is advised in advance not to disturb the closed system of the rectory.

Muriel sets out on her plan with Eugene as a spiritual support and his son as an instrument to give a shock to her niece, but she fails to carry it out, just as Marian Taylor in *The Unicorn* fails to bring out Hannah from Gaze Castle. She sees through a crack in the wallpaper the unexpected scene of Carel and Elizabeth together in bed, and is discouraged from her original plan. Now her eyes are opened to the reality so far concealed from her: Elizabeth is never “the pure heart of the household, its kernel of innocence”. Muriel finds “how very alike they [Carel and Elizabeth] are”.<sup>14</sup> The secret sight through a crack helps her get away from her father’s evil influences and enables her to look him in the eyes, when she talks with him in his study for the second time. Her escape from his black magic is explicitly shown in her direct naming of him.

Holding on to the edge of the door she called out with all the voice she had, loudly and clearly, uttering her father’s Christian name for the first time in her life, “Carel! Carel!”<sup>15</sup>

Peter Wolf remarks on Edmund’s direct naming of Maria in *The Italian Girl* that it reveals “that he has already objectified her as a private individual rather than the swarthy mana-archetype, the Medusa or the wrathful deity who cannot be faced or named directly”.<sup>16</sup> The same is true with Muriel’s direct naming. The quotation above implies that Muriel sees Carel objectively as a human being and not as a godlike figure.

But it is not until she hears Pattie’s confession about her father’s past sin and Elizabeth’s identity that she understands his dreadful nature and incestuous relationship with his daughter. Unable to put up with the evil and detestable reality around her revealed by Pattie, she decides to leave the rectory, but just before leaving, she is startled and bewildered to find her father close to death after taking an overdose of sleeping tablets. Now it is Muriel that looks down on her father and has the power of life or death over him. At the same time, however, she realizes that she loves him deep in her heart, and that love tells her not to wake him up but to liberate him from his suffering by letting him slip away into death. She follows her inner voice after all, and takes on herself the guilt of aiding and abetting her father’s suicide.

Nobody is so pathetic as Muriel in this novel. She yearns in vain for the simple, innocent world that Eugene lives in, and rebels against the black

father, not knowing that her existence is deeply rooted in him. The dark thing coming out of the ground to threaten her in her dream is the sign of evilness deeply knitted into her being. She discovers her own blackness at the end, which convinces her that she is completely separated from the white world she has yearned for.

She was condemned to be divided forever from the world of simple innocent things, thoughtless affection and free happy laughter and dogs passing by in the street.<sup>17</sup>

The world she steps into at the end is nothing but the dark world her father left by his own will.

#### 4

There are two female characters enslaved by Carel: his daughter Elizabeth born out of his revengeful rape of his sister-in-law and his maid Pattie. They are indispensable for his self-deification. As David J. Gordon writes, "Carel's blasphemies are accompanied by his sexual enslavement of dark Pattie and fair Elizabeth, the sugar plum fairy and swan princess of Tchaikovsky"<sup>18</sup>

Pattie, born between Negro father and white mother, has inky black hair and a "dark creamy skin", which symbolizes the dilemma of her duality. She does not belong either to the Negro community nor a white community. The only place where she can find the significance of her being is the rectory ruled by the black priest. She feels as if she were in the presence of God when she is in front of Carel. At the same time, however, she is attracted, just as Muriel is, to the world of simplicity and innocence represented by Eugene. Happily for her, Eugene loves her as well and declares his love to Pattie on that snowy day. She finds, however, she is unable to marry him because of the bond with her master. Her extreme suffering comes from her dual love for the characters totally incompatible to each other.

Her duality is implied by her name itself as well as her mixed blood and her skin color. Her real name "Pattikins" is connected with St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland. She pictures herself as being purified and unworldly as follows.



She would go far away and dedicate herself to the service of humanity and be Patricia for ever and ever after, Sister Patricia, perhaps Saint Patricia.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Patricia is a name suggestive of Patrician, "a member of a heretical sect which rose in the fourth century and held that the substance of the flesh was the work of the devil, not of God".<sup>20</sup> This negative meaning pertains to the dark maid enslaved by the satanic rector.

Pattie worships Carel as if he were God and devotes herself wholeheartedly to him. When he confessed his past sin many years ago, she forgave it and almost forgot it, but his confession, being locked deep in her soul, created the bond that knitted her deeply into his existence. Carel's hope is that she will continue to love and accept him, however evil he will turn out to be. He needs her worship to survive as God in the godless world. But Pattie cannot bear him to be in the incestuous relationship with his own daughter. She finds herself unable to forgive him for his immoral behaviors any more, and, finally, leaves the rectory, having lost the black love and the white love at the same time. Her deep, unselfish love for Carel is useless and ineffective while it is not based on his true character. It is a matter of course that in the master-slave relationship a slave cannot exercise any influence on a master. She is after all a failure in love and, like Shakespeare's dark Othello, the "one that loved not wisely but too well".<sup>21</sup>

## 5

Carel's death, presumably caused by Pattie's desertion, seems inevitable aesthetically as well as morally, because, allegorically interpreted, his suicide is nothing but the verification of the death of God. Carel holds the atheistic view of the world and, in Spear's words, "Carel has recreated God in his own image and substituted self for the true object of veneration"<sup>22</sup> Murdoch makes it clear that Carel's death is closely related to his atheism by adopting a circular pattern to the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Carel is both a sinner and a victim to the contingent human situations: a sinner, because of his past vengeful actions,

and a victim, because, unexpectedly and unreasonably for him, they caused his brother's suicide and the birth of Elizabeth. The title of the novel means that the angels that had been systematized and regulated by God so far were set free as a result of the disappearance of God. According to Carel, it is not the Absolute Being but the multiple angels that control the present human situations. Now that human beings are the prey to such unknown powers of the angels, it is impossible for them to regulate themselves according to God's will.

In the void of the Godless world, Carel deifies himself at the cost of the human dignity of people around him, but he is a false god after all and, forsaken by his dark angel Pattie, kills himself at the end. Ironically enough, his suicide verifies his black theory, i.e. the death of God. Muriel is assured at his deathbed that God is dead.

She had never more positively felt the utter and complete absence of God.<sup>23</sup>

The death of the atheistic central figure breaks up the small community at the rectory and disperses the inhabitants there. Eugene, his proposal to Pattie declined, moves into a church hostel in West Bermondsey. Pattie escapes from Carel and goes out to work in an African refugee camp. Muriel, doomed to take care of her paralytic half-sister, disappears "into the narrow labyrinth of the city"<sup>24</sup>. All of them, having lost their loves, make in sadness their heavy steps forward into the contingent godless world. Just as Eugene comments on his icon of the Holy Trinity "the milky blue angels are infinitely sad", they are exactly like angels set free by the death of God. Now that the integration of individuals by the absolute power is impossible, there is nothing to link them together. This is exactly the situation that Carel called the time of the angels and was terrified of.

In short, on the one hand, the time of the angels is the situation presupposed at the beginning of the novel, while on the other hand it is newly realized by the death of Carel at the end. The circular pattern of the novel, where the beginning coincides with the end, is underlined by the record of Carel's favorite music, Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake". When the music comes to an end at her father's deathbed, Muriel puts it back to the beginning. The symbolic use of the music record implies that Muriel, as a successor to Carel,

steps into the agonizing chaos of the godless world.

The time of the angels is pictorially presented in Eugene's icon of the Holy Trinity mentioned above, his last real possession supposed to have a miraculous power in Russia.

...while it was out it made all kinds of things happen, people suddenly confessed their crimes or became reconciled with their enemies.<sup>25</sup>

Today, it has lost its miraculous power. On looking at the Holy Trinity represented as three angels confabulating around a table, Caryl Phillips says instead of confessing his past crime, "How can those three be one?"<sup>26</sup> No miracle can happen in the present age when people do not believe in God. The picture of three angels that has lost its miraculous power is the symbol of the time of the angels, i.e. the present human situation without God.

According to Spear, "*The Time of the Angels* is a novel which plays with philosophical concepts that were very much to the forefront of Murdoch's mind at the time of writing it".<sup>27</sup> *The Time of the Angels* is certainly philosophical, but it succeeds in giving concrete shapes to philosophical ideas. It should be acknowledged that the plot structure and the rich imagery of the novel contribute to the vivid visualization of the unique human situation in the godless world. It is not for her philosophical ideas discussed in it but for her skillful fictional techniques that *The Time of the Angels* is taken to be one of the author's best novels. Contrary to Guy Backus's implication that she is more philosopher than novelist,<sup>28</sup> therefore, Iris Murdoch is an expert in fictional techniques above anything else.

### Notes

1. Miyoko Shimada, "An Interview with Iris Murdoch", *The Study of English* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, April 1969), p.10.
2. *The Unicorn* (Penguin, 1967), pp.218-19.
3. *The Time of the Angels* (Chatto and Windus, 1966), p.38. All the quotations are from this edition, which is abbreviated as *TA* below.
4. *Ibid.*, p.35.
5. A mouse is used to symbolize one's past confined deep into the subconscious, as is seen in Eugene's dream, which is to be mentioned below.

6. *TA*, p.170.
7. *Ibid.*, p.192.
8. *Ibid.*, p.107.
9. *Ibid.*, p.166.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.158-9.
11. His first name is supposed to come from the Greek "eugenes" for the English "well-born".
12. *TA*, p.46.
13. *Ibid.*, p.45.
14. *Ibid.*, p.198.
15. *Ibid.*, p.178.
16. *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), p.207.
17. *TA*, p.239.
18. *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (University of Missouri press, 1995), p.135.
19. *TA*, p.35.
20. OED, 'patrician', n2.
21. W. Shakespeare, *Othello*, V. ii. 345.
22. Hilda d. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p.57.
23. *TA*, p.236.
24. *Ibid.*, p.227.
25. *Ibid.*, p.62.
26. *Ibid.*, p.188.
27. *Op. cit.*, p.61.
28. Cited in Barbara Stevens Heusel, *Iris Murdoch's Paradoxical Novels: Thirty Years of Critical Reception* (Camden House, 2001), p.52.